



They called it the War on Christmas, but it wasn't much of a fight. No bullets, tanks or bombs had been necessary; just the passage of time and sociocultural evolution. Devotees argued the change had been made to expunge religion, specifically Christianity, from society; but at the time of the switch-over, very few churches complained. In a way, it was a relief to the true believers. The holiness of Christ's birthday would no longer be marginalized by commercialism.

But more than the distasteful, garish marketing that had become so entwined with the holiday; people came to the realization that the perceived obligation to spend the season being cheerful with family was heinous. First; it's cold. Nobody should be expected to be cheerful in single digit temps. Second; family sucks. They're nosy and pushy and you spend too much time and money buying them all the best gifts only to get soap-on-a-rope in return. Besides, some of them are just too goddamned weird to be around anyway. So at the beginning of the 21st century, people grew wise to the old Christmas-time guilt-trip of; *Yeah, I hate visiting family, but it's only once a year.*

Clearly illogical. If it's so awful, why do it at all; ever?

Therefore, in 2020, the federal government stopped recognizing December 25/26th as a national holiday. They moved it to October 31st/November 1st.

And why not? Halloween is just the best! For the kids - candy, fantasy, and staying up late watching scary movies; for adults - parties, colorful booze, and slutty costumes that fall right off as the night moves along. No burdensome commitments or unpleasant trips to overcrowded malls. And for those unfortunates who were lonely and depressed around the holidays - a bowl of candy and front door light ensured they'd have gleeful company frolicking around their yard on this special occasion.

Christmas had always been a giant pain-in-the-ass; whereas the only baggage that came with Halloween contained fun-sized candy bars.

The War was over. Long live Halloween!

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*Blood, or worms.... Blood, or worms....*

Virgil toggled the switch on his new projection effects kit and watched as the walls of his living room alternately oozed blood then squirmed with toothy annelids.

*Blood*, he decided. The nightmare worms crawling sluggish up and down the walls did

look terrifying, but that would get old. However, after the initial shock of seeing the room streaked with vibrant blood, the other effect settled into a fun sort of lava-lamp vibe. Perfect for the pre-party gathering Virgil had planned for his friends.

The doorbell rang and Virgil heard giggling. *Early?* he thought, and then noticed it had in fact turned dark outside. He'd lost track of time while futzing with the projector.

He opened the door and group of youngsters dressed up as the Guardians of the Galaxy yelled "Trick or Treat". Virgil dumped candy in their pumpkin buckets, fist-bumped Star Lord, and waved to the parents watching from the street.

And so it begins!

In a whirlwind of activity, Virgil zipped through the living room - blood seeping all around - into the kitchen where he started prepping snacks and drinks. Multi-tasking while he set out the food; Virgil also went around the house placing the rest of his decorations: plastic skulls, hanging rubber bats, scary-face pumpkins, and monster heads. Occasionally he also answered the door to distribute treats. On his frequent trips through the bloody living room, he checked the clock over the television that was set to mute. Whenever he did, he was tempted to sit and watch "The Great Pumpkin" or "Garfield's Halloween Special", but there was too much to do.

And he hadn't even decided on his costume yet!

He'd bought a rubber werewolf mask, but since then he'd invited Julie Muncie and she was really obsessive about her Halloween costumes. She'd shown him pictures of her past efforts - a mother nursing a foam-rubber beast; a ten foot tall 'slim-woman' phantasm; a sexy red-skinned fem-devil with the naughty bits covered only with fiery fur - all self-designed and crafted by hand. A store-bought mask wasn't likely to impress her.

And Virgil desperately wanted to impress Julie.

Distracted by these thoughts, Virgil realized he'd stopped moving while standing in the center of the living room surrounded by blood. The television was now playing The Halloween Tree and the childish part of Virgil's heart broke because he couldn't stop to enjoy one of his favorite specials. *I have it on DVD* he thought. *I can always*

*watch it later.*

But he knew that wouldn't be the same.

The microwave's beeping sent him running for the kitchen. He hadn't noticed the blood pooling on the ceiling above his head at a place where the beam from the projector couldn't possibly reach.

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Doorbell called and Virgil ran to answer. More kids; Avengers this time. As they accepted candy, the Hulk peered into the house and exclaimed, "Whoa! Look at all that blood!"

The living room was sopping with it now. It flowed down the walls in waves.

"Cool!" the assembled Avengers agreed, then skipped away. Virgil closed the door softly and moved slowly into the living room.

This wasn't how the projector should work. It was only supposed to display streaking trails. And this blood was much darker than the vibrant red he'd first seen.

He inhaled. The room stank like a surgical ward.

Suddenly the volume on the television came up. Loud. Virgil literally jumped, both feet left the ground.

On the television, Moundshroud was talking, his death-head filling the entire screen, breaking the 4th wall in a scene Virgil didn't recognize though he'd seen this show a dozen times.

"...of Halloween," Moundshroud said. "You still don't understand, do you?"

A flicker of motion caught Virgil's eye and he whipped his head to catch it. On the wall, under the flowing blood, he detected movement. A dark shape. Swimming in the blood.

"Hey, boy!" Moundshroud cackled. "After all this, you still don't get it? Bah! You're a

fool!"

Virgil shook his head. This was impossible! He felt something push against his feet. He looked down and let out a cry of alarm.

Blood. On the floor. Seeping at him from all four walls, trapping him in a closing circle.

"The spirit of Halloween," Moundshroud whispered using Leonard Nimoy's most wizened and musical voice, "isn't parties and treats. It isn't even fall harvests or remembrance of those who have died. Costumes and pranks. None of this. Do you hear me, boy? Do you understand?"

Virgil shuffled his feet, trying to escape the rapidly gathering blood.

"The real spirit of Halloween is....," the eyes of the charmingly retro, two-dimensional Hanna-Barbera rendering of Carapace Clavicle Moundshroud twinkled like stars, "The point behind it is...."

Blood washed over Virgil's feet.

"You're not safe!" Moundshroud bellowed.

Instantly, from the ceiling, an ocean of blood fell crashing over Virgil's head. From the walls, dark and hideous monsters splashed through the waves and reach for Virgil with eager claws and fangs.

The blood at his feet became glue and Virgil could do nothing but stand and scream.

*Happy Halloween!*